

This article is Non-peer-reviewed

Academic Filmmaking in the New Humanities

Articles. Introduction to the special issue

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Abstract

The article provides an introduction to the first of a pair of special issues devoted to academic filmmaking, which, apart from this introduction, contains eleven prose articles. The article describes the variety of filmmaking practice in the academy, and some of the venues where examples of the practice are published or exhibited. It gestures at the multiple origins of academic filmmaking with special reference to the tradition of the essay film, and finds a key re-

flexive moment in Eric S. Faden's (prose) "Manifesto for Critical Media" (2008), which articulated the challenge of using "image, voice, pacing, text, sound, music, montage, rhythm" to create scholarly audiovisual work. The introduction goes on to set out the aims for the special issues, and to describe the contents of the eleven articles in the first issue and some of the features, concerns or approaches shared between and across those contents. The eleven articles deal with themes raging from academic filmmaking as activism, to vulnerability and embodiment, to the challenges of production and publishing, and of institutional legitimization.

Keywords: Video essays, digital humanities, experimental scholarship, videographic criticism, practice research

This is the first of a pair of special issues devoted to academic filmmaking in the New Humanities, understood as a conglomeration of hybrid practices — such as digital humanities, environmental humanities, medical humanities, posthumanities, and public humanities — that reach across the arts to the social and natural sciences even as they incorporate and extend traditional humanities concerns and methods. With these two special issues, we have wished to evidence and interrogate the possibilities of filmmaking as research method, medium of scholarly communication and also as a distinct mode of thinking for this conglomeration of hybrid practices. This first issue contains eleven prose articles, while the second contains ten video essays accompanied by guiding texts. The first part of the short introduction is nearly identical in both special issues, but the latter part sets out the individual contents of each issue and indicates some of the features, concerns or approaches shared between and across those contents.

Because of the diversity of its practices and origins, any definition of academic filmmaking can only be a tautology: academic filmmaking simply refers to film or video made by academics or filmmaking practices undertaken by them. Some of the range of academic filmmaking can be examined in venues including *Sightlines: Filmmaking in the Academy*, *Screenworks*, the journal of screen media practice research, *Journal of Anthropological Films*, *Journal of Embodied Research (JER)*, the "Beyond The Text" strand of *Sociological Research Online*, and *[in]Transition*, a journal of videographic film and moving image

studies. (Both *JER* and *[in]Transition* are discussed by their editors in the first of these special issues, while the editors of *Sightlines* are also represented.) Academic film and video are also increasingly shown at conferences and festivals, and in museums, institutions which themselves draw on academic labour and expertise in the creation and curation of audiovisual works.

Filmmaking in the academy sometimes takes the form of practice (or practice-led / practice-based) research or creative (or creative-critical) research, in which, in order to generate knowledge, the film-making observes protocols from the arts rather than from traditional scholarship, even if such work is often accompanied by explication in more conventional prose forms (Nelson 2022, Lulkowska 2024). This is the case for much of the influential practice of special issue co-editor Catherine Grant, whose body of work includes contemplative digital videos like *Dissolves of Passion: A Film within a Film* (2014), a piece she locates in relation to both video art and scholarly concerns in a subsequent prose article (Grant 2019). But academic filmmaking takes place in a variety of modes: from documentary record and essay filmmaking to fictional storytelling, from participatory filmmaking to experiments (like Grant's *Dissolves of Passion*) in found footage curation and remix, from illustrated lecture to artistic experiment. Perhaps the best-known example of research filmmaking born in the academy is Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012), which uses a mix of straightforward documentary and imaginative reenactment to record and denounce the legacy of the 1965-66 Indonesian genocide. Forensic Architecture, a "research agency" based at Goldsmiths, University of London, likewise employ film as one of their techniques to investigate human rights violations, and to present their findings. The Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab uses film to access dimensions of the world that resist description in words, for example in the well-received *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, 2012), while anthropologist Christian Suhr uses a combination of prose and film in his *Descending With Angels: Islamic Exorcism and Psychiatry* (2019), described as a "film monograph", to speak nearby — to use Trinh T. Minh-ha's resonant phrase (Chen 1992)— the invisible phenomena of jinn possession and psychosis among Muslims living in Denmark. Artist filmmaker and academic Joanna Callaghan uses a mix of fictional and documentary modes in films including the 80-minute *Love in the*

Post (2014), inspired by Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card*, to explore ethical questions and women's experience.

It is worth noting that filmmaking in the academy has a history that long predates the digital period, stretching back through, for example, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's influential "theory film" *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). Mulvey herself has gone on to interrogate the affordances of the digital in a monograph, *Death 24x a Second* (2006) and short experimental videos like her remix of a scene from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Mulvey 2014), that have been particularly influential on the new field of videographic criticism, referring to the audiovisual analysis of audiovisual and screen media. Working separately and sometimes together, Kevin B. Lee (contributor to the first of these two special issues) and Chloé Galibert-Laîné have developed the desktop documentary format (the recording of the computer screen) to critique the industries of spectacle and capture the complexities of online life in compelling films like Lee's "Transformers: the Premake" (2014) and Galibert-Laîné's "Watching the Pain of Others" (2019). Videographic critic Ian Garwood uses the desktop format reflexively to interrogate "The place of voiceover in academic audiovisual film and television criticism" (2016) and is developing an audiovisual research project to the equivalent of book length (see Garwood 2020). The first such "videographic book" was published in spring 2024 in a series edited by Jason Mittell and published online by Lever Press. This is Mittell's own *The Chemistry of Character in "Breaking Bad"*, a collection of more than twenty videos ranging in length from a few minutes to a couple of hours, hosted on the digital platform Fulcrum and interspersed with prose reflections (Mittell 2024).

As this brief survey may suggest, the practices and so the origins of academic filmmaking are multiple: these origins include feature film and experimental cinema, news reportage and photojournalism, artist film and video, ethnographic film and documentary film in all of the modes identified by Bill Nichols (poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, and performative; see Nichols 2017), as well as film pedagogy (Pantenburg 2024). Key to the increasing presence of filmmaking in the academy and to the emergence of fields like videographic criticism has been the consumerization of digital technology and the relative affordability of film and computing hardware and editing software. In his "Manifesto

for *Critical Media*” published in 2008, film and media studies scholar Eric S. Faden located the practice of academic video essay-making in the tradition of the essay film reaching back to the Soviet filmmakers of the 1930s, and in a historical context of electronic—more recently, digital—culture that has superseded the alphabetic. Faden writes that academic video essay-making “does not replace traditional scholarship”; rather, “[t]his is a *new* practice beyond traditional scholarship.” To use terminology that Faden himself does not use, the video essay assumes *literacy* but is founded upon and cultivates *audiovisualcy*. Moreover, video essay-making implies “a shift in rhetorical mode”:

The traditional essay is argumentative—thesis, evidence, conclusion. Traditional scholarship aspires to exhaustion, to be the definitive, end-all-be-all, last word on a particular subject. The media stylo [Faden’s term for scholarly video essays], by contrast, suggests possibilities—it is not the end of scholarly inquiry; it is the beginning. It explores and experiments and is designed just as much to inspire as to convince. (Faden 2008)

Many scholars have since taken up Faden’s challenge of considering “image, voice, pacing, text, sound, music, montage, rhythm” in order to create scholarly audiovisual work, and (as set out below) it’s fair to say that the audiovisual works in the second of this pair of special issues confirm the exploratory and experimental character of the scholarly video essay that Faden identifies.

Along with the adoption of the audiovisual, there has emerged a lively and ongoing debate, amongst practitioners of videographic criticism especially, about the appropriate form that the digital video essay should take for the purposes of scholarship. This debate has taken place in dedicated books (van den Berg and Kiss 2016; Grizzaffi 2017; Keathley, Mittell and Grant 2019) and in journal special issues like *The Cine-Files* 15 (Cox-Stanton and de Fren 2020), which asks the question “what constitutes videographic scholarship?”. Beyond that, there is a scattered but substantial corpus of special sections or journal articles (and videos) that theorise videographic criticism or reflect on scholars’ own videographic practice in terms relevant for other scholars (see for example Keathley 2011; Grant

2014 and 2019; Mittell 2019 and 2021; Binotto 2020; Garwood 2020; Kiss 2021, 2024; O'Leary 2021; Bird 2023; Sekar 2024). Supplementing these reflections are the interviews conducted by Will Di-Gravio and his collaborator Emily Su Bin Ko on the *Video Essay Podcast*, inaugurated in 2019 with an interview with co-editor Catherine Grant.

The present pair of special issues reprises the task of evidencing and debating the possibilities of the video essay for scholarly practice. The editors' primary aim has been to bring together practitioners and scholars of filmmaking research, academic film and video-graphic criticism from across a range of disciplines to consider the affordances and challenges of filmmaking as means and medium of investigation and communication. But the special issues, and the second of the two especially, are also intended to debate and to demonstrate *how* the video essay can work as a scholarly form. The contributors adopt a variety of approaches to articulating their scholarly aims in the audiovisual form of a video essay. As the *Academic Quarter* submissions guide puts it: "Video essays should be original works of publishable quality in a rigorous scholarly context, and may take argumentative, expository, explanatory, documentary, performative, essayistic, poetic, symbolic (metaphorical) or artistic forms, or a combination of these." Most of the video essays published here do indeed offer a combination of these approaches. However, the reader/viewer is asked to notice how communication is performed most often not through explicit argumentation, but through affect, dialogic procedures, evocation and juxtaposition, questioning rather than answering, and even through irony. As Faden suggested in his 2008 manifesto, the video essay "moves scholarship beyond just creating knowledge and takes on an aesthetic, poetic function". The co-editors would argue that the videos in the second of our special issues suggest that this poetic function is essential to the knowledge function.

Note, however, that the videos in the second special issue do not appear alone. Building on established practice in journals like *[in]Transition*, each video is accompanied by a creator statement or "guiding text", designed to articulate "the research aims and process of the work as well as the ways in which those aims are achieved in the audiovisual form". The provision of a supporting statement is modelled after standard procedure for the articulation

of research questions and methods in university-based practice-research projects, as set out for example in the style guide of the UK-based *Screenworks* journal, founded in 2007, and described in the contribution to these special issues by Kerrigan, Frankham and Verdon. We acknowledge a key difference between our special issues and these journals: both *[in]Transition* and *Screenworks* publish the peer reviews along with each video (*[in]Transition* even provides the names of reviewers); in this context, the “act of scholarship” emerges in the encounter and intersection between the video and several prose texts (and multiple authors). We do not provide the peer reviews here, though we are extremely grateful to the very many reviewers who have generously lent their time and expertise to the preparation of these special issues: the positive stamp of their labour is all over the submissions and the project as a whole. However, we will point out that there is no assumption here that the video essays are to be considered as “autonomous objects”. It might go without saying that no scholarly output is an autonomous object; but it should be more apparent than usual that the content of the scholarship is to be grasped in a dialogue—in this case, a dialogue of video and accompanying prose text, as well as the existing body of creative and scholarly practice with which each submission engages.

As mentioned above, the co-editors have worked with the understanding that filmmaking can be used by scholars as a *means* to investigate a particular theme, phenomenon or object, or as a *medium* to report or publicise research results, or it can be understood as a *mode of thought* in itself (what some describe, drawing on Spatz (2018), as the “video way of thinking”). In the call for submissions, we asked potential contributors to respond to one or more of the following questions:

- What are the political, epistemic, and aesthetic advantages of filmmaking in the academic context, and what are its potentials?
- What place is there for experimental approaches to filmmaking in academic practice?
- What is the relationship and relative importance of process and product in academic filmmaking practice?
- What methods are used in academic filmmaking across the different disciplines? What do these have in common and how do they differ?

- What are the institutional opportunities for and impediments to the adoption and development of filmmaking in the academy?
- What are the challenges and possibilities for the publication or exhibition of academic filmmaking?

All of these questions have come to be addressed in one or more prose or video contributions across the two issues. In the next section, we summarise the individual contents of each issue and indicate some of the themes or approaches shared among those contents.

The articles

Addressing our call to consider the political advantages of filmmaking practices in the academy, Eylem Atakav considers her filmmaking as a form of activism as well as a research process in “The impact of documentary filmmaking: academics as agents of social and political change”. Using the examples of three films she has made on forms of gendered violence, *Growing Up Married* (2016), *Lifeline* (2020), and *Left Behind* (2023), Atakav argues that academic documentary offers a powerful means ways to share and activate knowledge, and to target change in cultural politics and policy. For Atakav, the cultivation of impact can go beyond mere institutional and funding necessity (it is an audited requirement of the UK academy where the author is based), to become a force for social justice.

In “Documentary and the question of knowledge”, Lizzie Thynne considers *Armotonta menoa – Hoivatyon laulujaan* (*Ruthless Times: Songs of Care*), a Finnish work made as part of a research project at the University of Aalto Critical Cinema Lab by director and academic Susanna Helke. Thynne utilises Jacques Rancière’s critique of political art and his idea of the distribution of the sensible to posit that Helke’s musical documentary about the privatization of elderly care in Finland constitutes a progressive model of testimonial practice. This is in part because the film/researcher team in this production resists “giving voice” to its participants; instead, in “orchestrating” their voices (literally setting them to music in choral sequences), the film aligns itself with the existing perspectives and activism of carers and nurses. In highlighting the political context of its contributors in these ways, Helke’s research film makes an important contribution to feminist documentary practice and to the generation of academic knowledge.

Several contributions address our question about the place of experimental approaches to filmmaking in academic practice. First, Jenny Oyallon-Koloski's article, "Thinking diegetically", turns to the scholarly field of videographic criticism. She explores the work of four practitioners (herself, Catherine Grant, Dayna McLeod and Liz Greene) whose videographic studies (and their aesthetics) engage with the constraints of their source materials' "diegetic tethers" to (re)construct a story world in meaningful and productive ways. In his essay "Unsettling bodies. Video essay as embodied research," Johannes Binotto combines an interest in aesthetic and political aspects in his exploration of the potential contribution of videographic research to a more vulnerable, non-normative academia of the future. He understands videographic research fundamentally as an embodied practice and posits the video essay itself as a body "mingled" with the body of the researcher.

In "On Academic Filmmaking as a 'Messy' Methodology", Pinar Fontini asks how the demands of the academy "get along with" the unpredictability of artistic practice. Using the case of her own PhD filmmaking, she describes how conditions in Istanbul during the Covid pandemic challenged the making of her work on contemporary female filmmakers from Turkey (which eventually became the film *Dream Workers* (2022)). Fontini describes how the necessarily "messy" processes she happily adopted might pose a challenge to academic norms and traditions.

Three "professor-artist-researchers", Andrés Dávila, Carlos Terán Vargas and special issue co-editor Libertad Gills, argue their case for experimental filmmaking as research on the basis of their work in the Universidad de las Artes, Ecuador. They explore their individual experiences of making the experimental ethnographic documentary short *Sour Lake* (Dávila, 2019), the found footage essay film *1922* (Gills, 2023), and the "imagework design" *Dispositivo ORG* (Terán Vargas, 2017-2024). Through the films' different formal approaches, they manage, the co-authors argue, to establish a significant and promising dialogue with teaching practices and research within the academy and also beyond.

In "Making Space for Film with Film Geographies", Jessica Jacobs approaches the question of institutional opportunities for and impediments to filmmaking in the academy from the perspective of the discipline of geography. Jacobs, founder of the online screening

initiative *Film Geographies*, offers her reflection on the origins of the platform at the margins of her discipline, and argues that the diverse affordances of the Film Geographies platform have generated much needed accessible film space for geographers to make, watch and debate films, enabling its participants to shape and influence a range of film-focused and practice-led contributions to the discipline. In so doing, she offers a model of good practice to colleagues in other disciplines in which academic filmmaking has not yet made significant inroads.

Critical questions of environmental politics and pedagogy are to the fore in Kevin B. Lee and Silvia Cipelletti's "Investigating Ecocinema through the Video Essay". Their detailed case study is the Video Essay for Ecocinema course they taught in the 2023 spring semester at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio, Switzerland. Arguing that videographic criticism "represents an exemplary mode of contemporary digital literacy that can be applied to a host of subjects", Lee and Cipelletti work with students to use the video essay to analyse how ecocinema can alert us to aspects of the environmental crisis. The authors set out how their course followed an ethos first described in relation to the video essay by influential practitioner Liz Greene, "to teach the student, not the subject, modelling ways for [students] to make their own connections to the topic of ecocinema."

In "A Decade of *[in]Transition: Reflecting on Past Challenges and Future Possibilities*", Kevin L. Ferguson and Drew Morton reprise Jessica Jacob's focus on the challenges and possibilities for the publication and exhibition of academic filmmaking. They write on the experience of co-editing *[in]Transition*, the innovative journal of film and moving image studies, which has been publishing research in videographic form since 2014. Morton, a founding editor, and Ferguson, a later recruit to the editorial collective, reflect on the journal's past challenges in establishing scholarly legitimacy, embedding innovative practices of open peer review, and maintaining an open approach when it came to setting good practice and understanding what constituted knowledge in videographic criticism. They also consider future possibilities for the journal now that it has transferred to a more sustainable platform at the Open Library of Humanities (which also hosts the *Journal of Embodied Research*), and as it confronts videographic modes such as "vidding" (fan music

videos) that push against the traditionally-defined boundaries of the “essayistic.”

In their article “A Filmmaking Research Continuum: The articulation of Creative Practice Research,” Australia-based academic filmmakers Susan Kerrigan, Bettina Frankham and James Verdon explore a range of international academic filmmaking modes located between audio-visual scholarship and commercial modes of filmmaking. They also explore the common practices and pragmatics, across academic filmmaking research modes, of demonstrating research legitimacy through the composition of the research statement. With particular reference to two peer reviewed online publications (*Screenworks* in the UK and the Australian journal *Sightlines*), they describe how creative practice research journals have been instrumental in helping to mature the discipline into a more rigorous and significant field.

Finally, in “The Textual, the Audiovisual, and Videographic Thought,” Ben Spatz speaks from their experience as founding editor of the videographic *Journal of Embodied Research*, to examine shifting relationships in academic filmmaking and creative practice among the textual, the audiovisual, and the videographic, terms which Spatz considers important to distinguish. Drawing on their own artistic research practice and critical theories of embodiment and identity, and recalling Johannes Binotto’s contribution to this special issue, Spatz argues that it is incumbent upon scholarly filmmakers of all kinds to critically re-examine the ways in which video and audiovisual media more generally remain entangled with bodies, places, and the “still-powerful technology of the written word.”

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